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INFO	LOG-00	ACDA-08	ACDE-00	ACQ-01	DODE-00	DOEE-00	SRPP-00
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FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
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INFO AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000252

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/25/09
TAGS: PGOV, PREL, VE

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SUBJECT: NEW VENEZUELAN CONGRESS BEGINS ITS SESSION, ELECTS ITS
LEADERSHIP

REFS: (A) CARACAS 00176, (B) CARACAS 00240

CLASSIFIED BY THOMAS A. SHANNON, POLITICAL COUNSELOR. REASON: 1.5
(D).

SUMMARY

1. (U) THE NEW VENEZUELAN CONGRESS, ELECTED NOVEMBER 8, OPENED ITS
SESSION JANUARY 23. ITS FIRST ACT OF BUSINESS WAS ELECTING ITS

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
REVIEW AUTHORITY: ALAN H FLANIGAN
CLASSIFICATION: UNCLASSIFIED
DATE/CASE ID: 08 JUN 2007 200504156

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OFFICERS. SENATOR LUIS ALFONSO DAVILA, A FORMER MILITARY OFFICER AND MEMBER OF HUGO CHAVEZ' FIFTH REPUBLIC MOVEMENT (MVR), WAS ELECTED PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE. HENRIQUE CAPRILES RADONSKI, A TWENTY-SIX YEAR-OLD FIRST TIME CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC (COPEI) LEGISLATOR, WAS ELECTED PRESIDENT OF THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES. TWO MEMBERS OF PROYECTO VENEZUELA (PV) WERE ELECTED FIRST VICE-PRESIDENTS OF THE TWO HOUSES. THIS ELECTION WAS THE RESULT OF A TEMPORARY ALLIANCE BETWEEN CHAVEZ'S POLITICAL ALLIANCE--POLO PATRIOTICO--AND PV AND COPEI. EXCLUDED FROM LEADERSHIP POSITIONS WAS THE DEMOCRATIC ACTION PARTY (AD), WHICH HAD ATTEMPTED BUT FAILED TO CUT A DEAL WITH MVR EARLIER THIS MONTH. THE ALLIANCE BETWEEN POLO PATRIOTICO, PV, AND COPEI WAS NOT WITHOUT CONTROVERSY. SEVERAL MEMBERS OF MVR PROTESTED THE DECISION OF PARTY LEADERS TO SUPPORT THE ELECTION OF A COPEYANO AS PRESIDENT OF THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES, AND COPEI'S FORMER PARTY FLOOR LEADER REFUSED TO VOTE FOR HIS OWN PARTY'S CANDIDATE. THE ALLIANCE, HOWEVER, WAS SEEN AS NECESSARY TO INSTALL THE NEW CONGRESS AND MOVE QUICKLY ON ITS FIRST

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ORDER OF BUSINESS: CONVOKING A REFERENDUM ON THE ISSUE OF THE PROPOSED CONSTITUTIONAL ASSEMBLY. END SUMMARY

NEW CONGRESS, NEW LEADERS

2. (U) ON SATURDAY, JANUARY 23, CONGRESS HELD ITS OPENING SESSION, INSTALLED ITS NEW MEMBERS, AND ELECTED THE LEADERSHIP OF BOTH HOUSES OF CONGRESS.

3. (U) LUIS ALFONSO DAVILA, RETIRED ARMY COLONEL, FIFTH REPUBLIC MOVEMENT MEMBER, AND A KEY ADVISOR TO PRESIDENT-ELECT HUGO CHAVEZ, WAS ELECTED PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE. THE FIFTY-FIVE YEAR OLD DAVILA IS THE MVR SENATOR FROM ANZOATEGUI STATE. HE IS THE FIRST FORMER MILITARY OFFICER TO SERVE AS PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE SINCE THE 1958 OUSTER OF PEREZ JIMENEZ. DAVILA HAS BEEN FRIENDS WITH CHAVEZ SINCE HIS EARLY MILITARY DAYS. HE WAS NOT IMPLICATED IN THE 1992 COUP. AS PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE, DAVILA IS ALSO PRESIDENT OF THE CONGRESS, AND IS FIRST IN THE LINE OF SUCCESSION SHOULD THE PRESIDENT BE INCAPACITATED.

4. (U) HENRIQUE CAPRILES RADONSKI, A TWENTY-SIX YEAR-OLD CHRISTIAN DEMOCRAT (COPEI) AND FIRST TIME LEGISLATOR, WAS ELECTED PRESIDENT OF THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES. CAPRILES IS THE SCION OF A WELL-KNOWN FAMILY WITH LARGE BUSINESS INTERESTS THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. HE WAS ELECTED IN ZULIA, IS A LAWYER BY PROFESSION (PRACTICING TAX AND COMMERCIAL LAW), AND IS A MEMBER OF WORLD ASSOCIATION OF YOUNG LAWYERS.

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LEADERS THE PRODUCT OF COMPROMISE

5. (U) DAVILA AND CAPRILES WERE NOMINATED AND ELECTED AS COMPROMISE CANDIDATES FOLLOWING COMPLICATED AND EXTENSIVE NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN ALL THE MAJOR PARTIES. THE FIRST ROUND OF NEGOTIATIONS, WHICH TOOK PLACE EARLIER THIS MONTH, INVOLVED AN EFFORT BY THE DEMOCRATIC ACTION PARTY (AD) TO SUPPORT MVR SENATOR HERNAN ESCARRA FOR THE PRESIDENCY OF THE SENATE IN EXCHANGE FOR AD GETTING THE PRESIDENCY OF THE LOWER HOUSE. THESE NEGOTIATIONS BROKE DOWN AFTER MVR AND PRESIDENT-ELECT HUGO CHAVEZ DECIDED MVR COULD NOT AFFORD POLITICALLY TO BE SEEN MAKING DEALS WITH AD (REF A). THE NEXT ROUND OF NEGOTIATIONS BEGAN SHORTLY AFTER, WITH AD REACHING OUT TO HENRIQUE SALAS ROMER'S PROYECTO VENEZUELA (PV), COPEI, CONVERGENICA, APERTURA, AND RENOVACION IN AN EFFORT TO CREATE AN ANTI-MVR SUPER BLOCK. IN THIS NEGOTIATION, AD PROPOSED THE PRESIDENCY OF THE SENATE FOR ITSELF AND THE PRESIDENCY OF THE LOWER HOUSE FOR PV. THIS DEAL FOUNDERED WHEN COPEI REFUSED TO PUSHED ASIDE IN FAVOR OF PV, AND WHEN PV GOT COLD FEET AFTER DISCERNING THAT AD WOULD USE ITS LEADERSHIP IN THE SENATE TO BLOCK CONGRESSIONAL EFFORTS TO FACILITATE CHAVEZ'S PROPOSED CONSTITUTIONAL ASSEMBLY.

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6. (C) FOLLOWING THE VERY PUBLIC FAILURES OF THESE EFFORTS TO NEGOTIATE CONGRESSIONAL LEADERSHIP, CONCERN GREW WITHIN MVR, COPEI, AND PV THAT THE CONGRESS MIGHT BE STYMIED IN ITS FIRST SESSION. WORRIED ABOUT CONGRESS' ALREADY LOW PUBLIC POPULARITY, AND INTENT ON AVOIDING AN INSTITUTIONAL CRISIS, MVR, COPEI, AND PV SOUGHT TO RESOLVE THE LEADERSHIP ISSUE ON THE EVE OF INSTALLATION OF THE CONGRESS (REF B). INITIALLY, MVR PROPOSED IT SHOULD TAKE THE PRESIDENCY OF THE SENATE AND OFFERED THE PRESIDENCY OF THE LOWER HOUSE TO PV. COPEI, HOWEVER, AGAIN REFUSED TO BE LEFT WITHOUT A PRESIDENCY. PV, IN STATESMANLIKE FASHION, DECIDED TO TRADE THE PRESIDENCY OF THE CHAMBER FOR THE POSITIONS OF FIRST VICE-PRESIDENT IN THE SENATE AND THE CHAMBER. MVR AND COPEI ACCEPTED THIS OFFER, BUT MVR REFUSED TO ALLOW COPEI FLOOR LEADER NELSON CHITTY LA ROCHE, OR ANY OTHER WELL-KNOWN COPEI POLITICIAN, TO OCCUPY THE PRESIDENCY OF THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES. COPEI, IN ORDER TO HOLD THE PRESIDENCY, HAD TO FIND A COPEYANO WHO WOULD PASS MVR MUSTER. THE ONLY MEMBER OF THE COPEI BENCH WHO MET THIS REQUIREMENT WAS THE FRESHMAN CAPRILES. ON THE MVR SIDE, THE ORIGINAL CANDIDATE FOR PRESIDENCY OF THE SENATE, HERNAN ESCARRA, WAS DISCARDED BECAUSE OF HIS POLITICAL HISTORY--HE WAS ONCE A COPEYANO--AND BECAUSE OF RUMORS OF PAST CORRUPTION. WITH SENATOR LUIS MIQUILENA ALREADY DESIGNATED TO BE MINISTER OF INTERIOR, MVR WAS FAST RUNNING OUT OF ACCEPTABLE SENATORS. THE NEXT OBVIOUS CHOICE WAS DAVILA, WHO, ALTHOUGH A FRESHMAN HIMSELF, IS WELL-RESPECTED AND CONSIDERED A VOICE OF MODERATION WITHIN MVR.

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VOTE GENERATES CONTROVERSY

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7. (C) THE DEAL MAKING IN THE CONGRESS WAS NOT WITHOUT CONTROVERSY OR OPPOSITION. SEVERAL MEMBERS OF THE POLO PATRIOTICO CRITICIZED THE DECISION TO CUT A DEAL WITH COPEI AND TO ALLOW THIS TRADITIONAL PARTY TO OCCUPY AN IMPORTANT LEADERSHIP POSITION. THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF VENEZUELA (PCV) REFUSED TO VOTE IN THE LEADERSHIP ELECTION IN PROTEST. WITHIN COPEI, NELSON CHITTY DE LA ROCHE AND SEVERAL OTHER OLD LINE LEADERS ALSO PROTESTED THE DECISION, AND REFUSED TO VOTE WITH THE PARTY.

8. (C) THIS OPPOSITION, HOWEVER, WAS NOT ENOUGH TO OVERCOME THE DECISION BY MVR, COPEI, AND PV PARTY CAUCUSES TO ELECT LEADERS AND INAUGURATE THE CONGRESS.

AD ON THE OUTSIDE

9. (C) THE BIG LOSER IN SATURDAY'S ELECTION WAS AD. THE LARGEST SINGLE PARTY IN THE CONGRESS, AD WAS SHUT OUT OF LEADERSHIP POSITIONS. TO ADD INSULT TO INJURY, DAVILA, WHEN SELECTING THE CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEES WHICH WOULD VISIT THE PRESIDENT AND THE SUPREME COURT TO INFORM THESE BRANCHES OF GOVERNMENT THAT THE CONGRESS HAD CHOSEN ITS LEADERSHIP--A QUAIN T NINETEENTH CENTURY CUSTOM STILL ADHERED TO IN VENEZUELA--EXCLUDED AD. AD LEADERS PROTESTED VIGOROUSLY, AND AD FLOOR LEADER HENRY RAMOS ALLUP SPOKE DARKLY OF THE MISTAKE WHICH THE OTHER PARTIES HAD MADE BY MARGINALIZING SUCH A LARGE GROUP OF LEGISLATORS. HOWEVER, NO ONE SEEMED TO BE LISTENING.

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COMMENT

10. (C) THE FIRST TASK OF THE NEW CONGRESS WILL BE TO CONVOKE THE REFERENDUM ON CHAVEZ'S PROPOSED CONSTITUTIONAL ASSEMBLY, THEREBY MOVING THE "CONSTITUYENTE" PROCESS FORWARD AND AVOIDING AN INSTITUTIONAL CONFRONTATION BETWEEN THE CONGRESS AND THE PRESIDENCY. THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS TASK DROVE LEADERS IN MVR, COPEI, AND PV TO MAKE COMPROMISES WHICH, UNDER OTHER CIRCUMSTANCES, THEY WOULD HAVE BEEN HESITANT TO MAKE. THIS STATESMANLIKE BEHAVIOR, ESPECIALLY BY TWO PARTIES--MVR AND PV--WHICH HAVE HAD NO PRIOR CONGRESSIONAL EXPERIENCE, IS ENCOURAGING.

11. (C) THE ALLIANCE BETWEEN MVR, COPEI, AND PV IS TEMPORARY AND BUILD AROUND ELECTING CONGRESSIONAL LEADERSHIP. IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN WHETHER OR NOT IT WILL ENDURE IN ANY FORM. HOWEVER, THIS ALLIANCE HARKENS BACK TO THE TRIPLE ALLIANCE--COPEI, THE RADICAL

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CAUSE PARTY (LCR) AND THE MOVEMENT TOWARDS SOCIALISM (MAS)--WITH
THE PRINCIPLE DIFFERENCE THAT THIS ALLIANCE CONSISTED OF THREE
ELECTORALLY WEAK PARTIES. MVR'S STRONG POSITION IN THE CONGRESS-

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SECOND TO AD--MAKES ANY ONGOING ALLIANCE WITH COPEI, PV, AND OTHER
PARTIES A MORE WORRISOME PROSPECT FOR AD.

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